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The Picturesque Architecture of MEXICO

BY

Louis La Beaume & Wm Booth Papin

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THE PICTURESQUE ARCHITECTURE OF MEXICO

IT is strange that the Architectural treasures of Mexico, a country so accessible to the American tourist, should be so little known. Comforts for the traveller are not yet to be expected in the same degree as prevails in Europe; yet the continual and delightful surprises which lie in wait for the observer offer him a rich reward for such sacrifices of his personal convenience as he may be called upon to make.

Picturesqueness, in the literal meaning of the term, is the quality which impresses one first, last and always. Mexico is essentially a painter's country. Under its vivid sunlight landscape, costumes and architecture sparkle with a freshness that is exhilarating. It is a country of sharp and stimulating contrasts. Its landscape varies from the densest tangle of tropical verdure to the gray sterility of the sandy desert dotted only by the thorny cactus and reaching to a haze of snow capped mountains in the distance. Its population is mixed, embracing a wide range of types from the primitive, half naked Indian, the descendant of the original possessor of the land, to the polished scion of the conquering race, graceful and courteous, in manner and aspect redolent of the Continental capitals, in which he is as much at home as in his own Hacienda. These types mingle and jostle each other in the splendid avenues of the Capital, in the promenades of the Alameda, and the lovely gardens at the base of Chapultepec. Here the silk hat and correctly cut black coat of the dandy make the scarlet serape and wide-brimmed, cone-crowned sombrero of the peon all the more startling. To the wondering gaze of the observer from the North it is like nothing so much as a scene from some light, very light opera; the movement, color, grace, and the ever present music making for an air of strange but delightful unreality. Round-eyed little soldiers and black-cloaked priests pass to and fro interminably. And as one watches the moving drama the conclusion is forced upon one that these latter, seemingly supernumeraries, have really the active parts. For the Army and the Church stand, and have stood for centuries, between the improvident peasantry, with their pathetic superstitions, and their lords and masters.

The gold-seeking Cortes appeared upon the scene at the head of a small but intrepid band of adventurers in November, 1518, and but three short years sufficed for the complete subjection of the native populace. Under his forceful sway the ancient forms and customs gave way to those of the conquering race. In less than four years after the destruction of the Aztec city of Mexico, a new Spanish city arose on its ruins. Splendid buildings were erected, roads, bridges, viaducts and water systems were planned and executed on a gigantic scale. Villages and towns came into being from one end of the land to the other. Spain, glorious in arms and

in the Arts, imposed her civilization upon this ancient people and all vestige of the civilization of the Montezumas was swept away, almost as if it had never been. The rapid spread of Spanish Arts and Sciences was due in largest measure to the powerful and disciplined activity of the Church. One of the first acts of the ambitious Cortes, after he had firmly established himself in the country, was to send forth a call for missionaries from the old world to plant the true cross on this newly-discovered soil. The conversion of the natives was easy and rapid, as the Aztec forms of worship, remarkable for their ceremonial, had prepared the people for the pomps and splendors of the Roman ritual. The building of churches progressed with the winning of converts and it has been estimated that at the end of the second century after the conquest, no less than eight thousand separate church buildings were in existence—sixty of them being in the capital alone.

Naturally the architecture of these churches followed closely the styles prevailing in the mother country. That is to say, it followed them as closely as the recollection of the monastic builders would allow, and as the local circumstances and materials would permit. The architecture of Mexico, as exemplified in the buildings of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is the architecture of the Spanish Renaissance repeated in a cruder form. In spite of the fact that it has been the fashion to deprecate the work of the Spanish architects during this period and to compare it unfavorably in the elements of restraint and refinement with Italian art of the same time—it yet must be admitted that notwithstanding its great crudity of detail and its often haphazard and seemingly accidental composition, much of this Mexican work is amazingly beautiful. The examples which are known to us, possess the same merit of their defects to be found in the Spanish examples. The same free use, or misuse, of the Orders and the same almost Oriental over-decoration are evident. The same excellences of mass and scale and the same contrast of enriched surfaces with plain, unbroken walls, please the eye and disarm the critical sense. But above all, the silhouettes of the lovely towers and the graceful domes give a charm to these churches scarcely to be discovered elsewhere.

After paying full tribute to the original sources of inspiration, the feeling remains that the Spanish Renaissance gained something by its transplantation to Mexican soil. That it should have lost something too in precision and finesse is but natural. But, the qualities of spontaneity, freshness and naiveté which characterize all of the Mexican work, give to it an individuality and make an appeal which cannot be resisted. Moreover, the differences in material—the more sparing use of stone and the greater evidence of stucco, together with the skilful employment of polychrome tiling—contribute toward the impression of greater informality.

The gain in color under the brilliant sunlight is notable. Pigment and nature have combined to wash and stain every surface with the most ravishing hues. Pale pinks, and mauves, and umbers streak the warm stucco, and crisp, translucent shadows fall easily and smoothly from cornice and balcony, or lie cool and inviting in the deep recesses of portal and arcade. One is continually turning the angle of a shaded, narrow street only to come face to face with the most exquisite of water colors left wet and sparkling by some Titanic brush. The pure green, blue and orange tiles which cover the swelling domes in patterns are picked out unerringly and

the huddled form of an Indian makes with his serape, just the right splash of vermilion in the sunlit foreground. Here one catches a glimpse of the rich rose-purple of the Bougainvillea vine against a white or lemon-tinted wall and there, the glowing globes of ripe orange fruit in the thick, glossy foliage of some enticing garden. Through the curve of a low archway, from a sunny arcaded patio, comes the cool sound of trickling water and behind the grating of a window the soft eyes of some dusky senorita sparkle. At a wayside well, laughing boys fill their jars, or droves of patient donkeys crowd to slake their thirst. In most of these alluring pictures some note of architecture, however slight, is present and becomes a factor in the composition.

Of the earlier buildings, perhaps the most widely known is the palace of Cortes at Cuernavaca, completed in 1531. Its low arches sprung from rather stocky columns, are possibly more Romanesque than Spanish in feeling, but later buildings more closely follow the Renaissance tradition in an increase of grace and lightness. There are other examples of arcaded courtyards of this period, but they are not numerous, and most of the surviving work, both ecclesiastical and secular, dates from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the cornerstone of the Cathedral of the City of Mexico, which stands upon the site of a former Aztec temple, was laid in 1573, the Church was not finally dedicated until 1677, and the towers were not completed until 1791. This Cathedral though imposing and dignified in design is not characteristic in the same degree as many of the minor Cathedrals and churches scattered throughout the country. In comparison with them, it is formal and cold in its pseudo classicism. The Sagrario-Metripolitana (on the other hand) which adjoins it is a magnificent example of the highly ornate Churrigueresque. Traces of this latter style are evident in many of the Churches in the city, as well as elsewhere, notably at Zacatecas, Valenciana, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, Orizaba and Puebla. Some altar pieces in this manner remain and doubtless others existed in interiors now bare and denuded.

Of the purer and more refined Plateresque there are fewer examples and it is easy to understand how the coarse and florid style of Churriguera might have been chosen almost with deliberation to impress and awe the unsophisticated natives. Nor is this altogether a matter of regret, for his writhing and wriggling ornament, his broken and curved entablatures glitter and scintillate with wonderful effect. One has much the same feeling with regard to the glazed tiles of many colors which cover the usually low but finely curved domes. Their use is general, but they are seen in their greatest variety and richness at Puebla. The domes themselves, of which there must be hundreds, are almost without exception graceful in contour, and support exquisite lanterns. In fact it is by their charming silhouettes and the countless number of beautiful campaniles and towers, that the Architecture of Mexico is best remembered. Everywhere these towers rise above the surrounding landscape and everywhere they are lovely in outline.

The twin towers of the Cathedral at Morelia (formerly Valladolid) are particularly impressive. They are finely designed in the more dignified and restrained Plateresque, rising to a greater height than is common and dominating the valley in which this most interesting little

city lies. Its quaint air of decorum, its well ordered streets—many of which are arcaded almost in the Italian manner, its quiet little squares, and the restraint and refinement shown in the simple facades of its principal buildings, recall some small Continental capital or seat of learning. The Cathedral was begun in 1640, and dedicated in 1706, although the towers were not finally completed until 1744. The fine iron work of its enclosure is of a later date.

There is no such profusion of beautiful metal work in Mexico as in the mother country, but many simple grilles and balconies, excellent in design and craftsmanship, are to be found in all of the principal towns and cities.

The domestic architecture of the cities varies in elaboration with the wealth and importance of the individual. Many of the houses present plain facades pierced by few small and heavily barred windows to the street, but enclose patios or courtyards of considerable interest. Some of the tiniest of these have much charm and the larger often attain a real measure of dignity. Courtyards like those of the Iturbide Palace in the City of Mexico and the Federal Palace at Queretaro are even grandiose owing to the ornamentation of their spandrels, archivolts and piers. Some private palaces also possess highly ornate street facades and the comparative rarity of these adds to the richness of their effect.

With the general development of the country which is sure to follow the establishment of peace and order, much of the charm and quaintness of the Old Mexico must pass. Today, however, it is a land full of interest for the architect, the painter and the sympathetic traveller ready to respond to the appeal of the strange, the quaint, the beautiful or the picturesque.

Louis La Beaume.

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18 Dome

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21 Church of Sta. Teresa la Antigua

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23 Tower, Church of La Concepcion

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28 Church of la Profesa

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55 Fountain—Federal Palace

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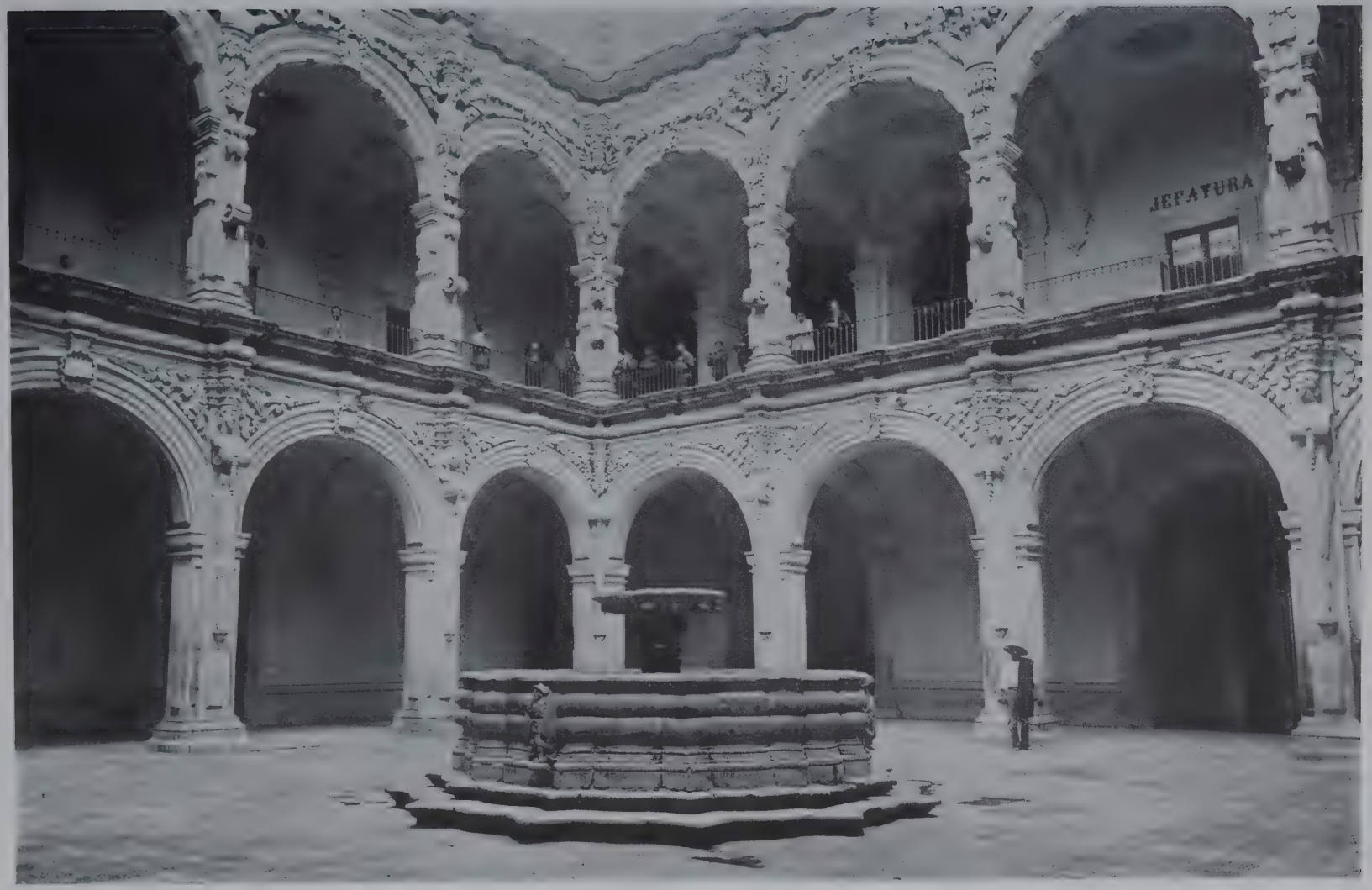

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ACAMBARO

66 Parish Church

GUANAJUATO

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MORELIA

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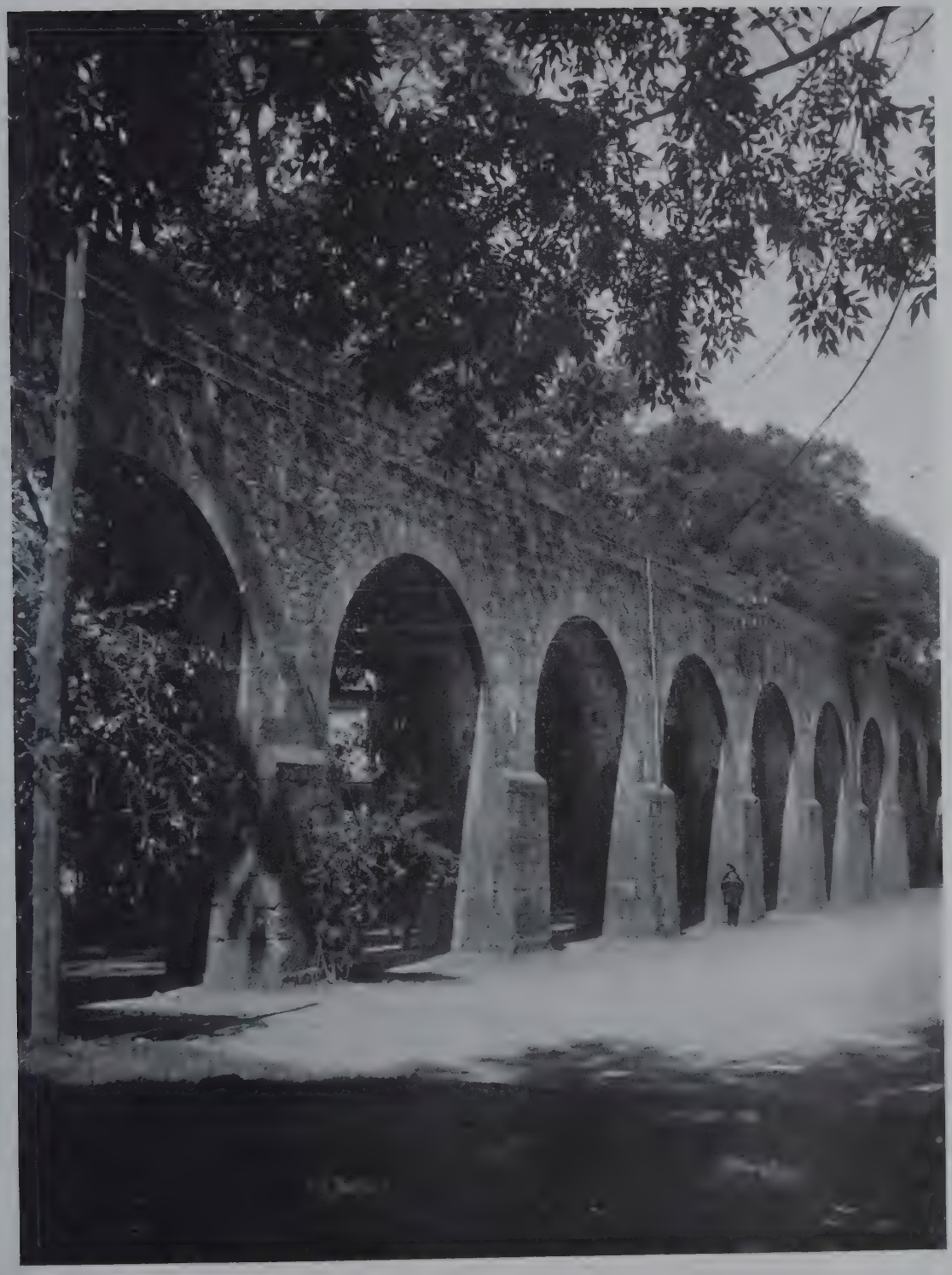

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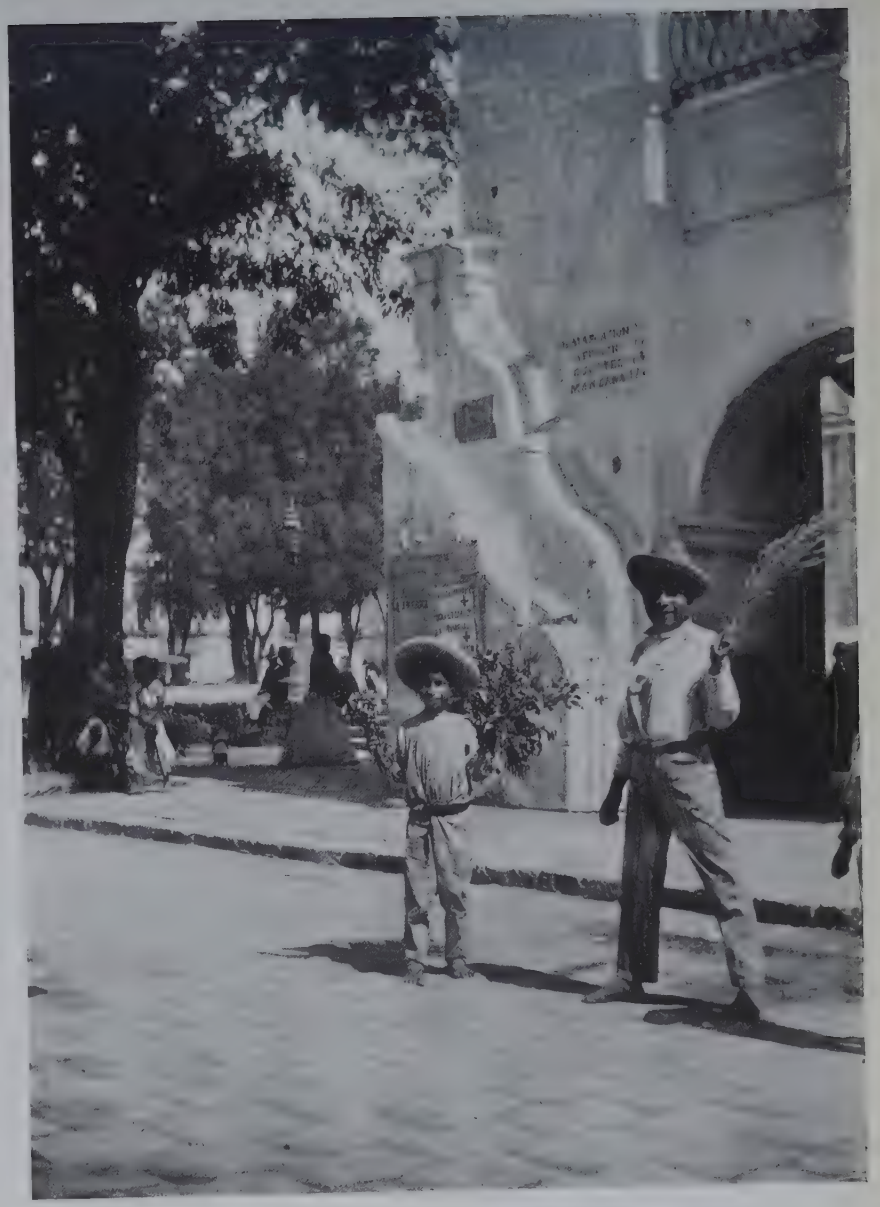

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